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ABSTRACT

The effects of high stakes testing may be critical in the lives of public school students and may have many consequences for schools and teachers. There are no easy answers in measuring student achievement and in holding teachers accountable for learner progress. High stakes testing also involves responsibilities on the part of the principal who must involve teachers in quality in-service education programs to offer the best in student education. Parents too have a vital part to play in the current high stakes testing movement, and they should learn what the test means and how to prepare their child. Motivation in test taking is a real problem. Student anxiety is one of the factors that must be considered. When the stakes are low, more energy might be available for test taking. Much research and development will be needed to resolve questions about high stakes tests. (SLD)

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High Stakes Testing and Student Achievement

Marlow Ediger

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HIGH STAKES TESTING AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Much is written in educational journals and reports presented in the news media about high stakes testing. High stakes testing certainly does have its repercussions. The effects of high stakes testing may be critical in the lives of pubic school students. A student then who does not receive a high school diploma due to not passing a state mandated test may indeed be penalized in many ways. If the student does stay on in high school for remedial work in order to pass the high school exit test, he/she is left behind peers who did pass the state mandated test satisfactorily. The chances are that unsuccessful students in passing the exit test will drop out of school. If high stakes testing is not used, advocates say that students may not try to achieve the state mandated objectives. and so the debate goes on.

High Stakes Testing

High stakes testing then involves crucial decisions that may well affect a student for a long time indeed. Many, however, will pass these tests and go on toward achieving other objectives in college, at the work place, and in the societal arena. There are even unethical reasons given for using high stakes testing; the following, among others, are then given for opposing high stakes testing:

1. discouraging students from taking certain courses due to lowering test scores in the school.
2. dropping students from courses several weeks/months after the course has begun.
3. providing students with the actual test questions, prior to official test administration.
4. hurrying students to an alternative school during testing time so that their scores will not count in the schools' average results.
5. providing assistance to students during the time the tests are administered.
6. making copies of secure tests so that they may be used in future years (Fabrizio, 2000, as quoted by McColskey and Mc Munn in The Phi Delta Kappan).

Why is the attempt at raising student test scores so vital to many schools? With state bankruptcy laws, a school deemed to be inefficient in student test scores can be taken over by the state. In other cases, money may not be forthcoming to financially support school operations if low test scores are in evidence. The feeling here is that low achieving schools should be weeded out. Vouchers may be used for parents to opt out their children attending these failing schools. The voucher money then goes from the sending school to the receiving school for these

students. Charter schools may increase in number in which these kinds of schools may not accept the low achievers.

Frequently, the term accountability is used to define a teacher's responsibility. Thus, a teacher is to be held accountable for students doing well on state mandated tests. There certainly are problems here, such as the following:

1. low income students tend to score low on state mandated tests. Suburban area students tend to do very well on state mandated tests. the questions then arises as to tests measuring socioeconomic levels rather that academic achievement.

2. it is difficult to know what turns a student on in order to be motivated to achieve. The teacher cannot look into the mind of the learner and discover precisely what is needed. A teacher then needs to try different methods and procedures of instruction with the hope that a student then desires to learn, grow, and develop.

3. externally determined objectives by a state presents problems to the teacher. One problem is to adjust the objective to where a learner is presently in achievement and then provide scaffolding for optimal student achievement. A second problem, among others, is to select learning opportunities which assist the learner to achieve the state mandated objective(s). The author has speculated on should states suggest highly specific learning opportunities which harmonize with the stated objectives.

4. test items are unrelated to each other. This might well tend to fragment knowledge in the minds of students taking these tests. Test writers and specialists recommend that no clues be available from one test item to the next on a test written for students to take. Educational psychologists, however, advocate learners perceiving that knowledge is related which makes for easier retention and use of ideas gained.

5. tests lacking validity, in particular. What has been taught may not be what is on a test, making for a lack of validity. One of my university colleagues made a statement one day that students complain if the test item she wrote is not stated in exactly the same words as what was discussed or lectured on in class.

Reliability is also important, be it test/retest, alternative forms, and/ or split half (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Twelve).

6. teachers spending an excess amount of item on teaching test taking skills. Drill on these skills robs students from learning what is useful, practical, and worthwhile since test taking is not emphasized at any workplace. Rather, the worker is assessed in terms of how well he/she does in actual work situations.

There are no easy answers when measuring student achievement in school and in holding teachers accountable for learner progress. The test items may be written at a very high level of achievement making it

impossible for learners to be successful in passing the involved test. The expectations for student achievement may then be unrealistic. The following additional questions may be asked pertaining to high stakes testing?

1. what can be done to motivate students to do their best in taking mandated tests? There are students who have refused to take a mandated test or they deliberately failed a part of the exam (Mc Ginn,1999).
2. what affect does failure or passing of these tests have on students? Failing a test certainly does take its toll, especially when diplomas are withheld from high school graduation. The prior worry of possibly failing the test might be toll taking of a mentally healthy individual. Then too, the time given for feelings of disappointment or worry of failure might well be spent in a more positive way.
3. are there better, more positive ways, to have students show what has been learned than paper/pencil tests, such as in multiple intelligences theory? (Gardner, 1993).
4. which specific guidelines may be developed and used in writing test items at the appropriate level of difficulty?
5. can test items be written which are not socio-economically biased?
6. how can high stakes test results be used for diagnostic and remedial work, rather than for sorting and punishing?
7. how young an age level should high stakes tests be used, if at all, for promotion purposes, such as from kindergarten to grade one?
8. what is the motive for giving high stakes tests? There are educators who believe that students are not working hard enough in school and need the carrot/stick approach to achieve at a more appropriate level, or that teachers are not trying hard enough to do a good job of teaching, among other reasons.
9. what is the role of school administrators in being accountable for students results in high stakes testing?
10. what should be stressed in terms of <u>skills</u> and <u>attitudes</u> to be measured in high stakes testing? Generally, subject matter content in the academics is measured to ascertain student achievement.

There are more questions than answers when raising doubts about the measurement movement in education.

The Role of the Principal in High Stakes Testing

High stakes testing seems to involve responsibilities on the part of many in education and in society. The Principal, among other school administrators, is no exception. He/she is the leader of the school and helps set the tone for student achievement and progress. The principal

then needs to work with teachers in setting realistic objectives for student attainment. These ends include incorporating state mandated goals, testing and test readiness objectives, alignment of learning opportunities with these objectives, sequence in learning, ways of organizing the curriculum, and implementing tenets from educational psychology.

The school principal needs to involve teachers in quality inservice education programs in order to offer the best in student education. Workshops, faculty meetings, training sessions, assisting teachers one-on-one in the classroom, talking to teachers about innovative procedures in teaching, and sending out bulletins in school pertaining to quality ideas in teaching gleaned from educational journals. Inservice education needs to be in the offing, but not overdone. There needs to be an accepted purpose by participants for inservice offerings in curriculum improvement. Feasibility to implement new or innovative ideas needs to be inherent. What about the role of the principal in high stakes testing? The following are salient questions here:

1. should principals be on probation or dismissed if students test scores are below accepted par?
2. specifically, what role should principals play in being accountable for successful student results in high stakes testing?
3. how should principals be prepared in graduate university programs in school administration?
4. how much emphasis should be placed upon high stakes testing in preparing school administrators?
5. how might principals exert more influence on having students do well in high stakes testing? (See Ediger, 1999, 233-240).

At the present time high stakes testing has its emphasis in teaching and learning situations. Report cards tend to accompany high stakes testing in that the results from a school district are published and made available to the lay public. Comparisons may then be made of school systems to increase competition in offering a better education to students.

The Role of Parents in High Stakes Testing

Parents have a vital part to play in the current high stakes testing movement. Certainly, an offspring who has failed a test causes much concern within a family. The child may become bitter and disillusioned with what has happened. Failure in high stakes test results can be the lot of any student. If that child drops out of school without a high school diploma, the chances for some success in life certainly does go downhill fast. Which are selected questions then which need resolving in high stakes testing?

1. what can parents do if they disagree vehemently with high stakes testing? Generally in these cases, an offspring has failed a vital test. It might even have been that the child worked hard with much study to prepare for the high stakes test.

2. what can be done if parents believe additional assessments should be in vogue, other than the high stakes test to determine a student's future?

3. what role do parents have in preparing their offspring for taking a high stakes test?

4. what can be done to use high stakes test results for diagnostic and remedial purposes? Parents might then be involved to help the learner remedy what was missed on the test.

5. what may be done to assist parents to understand how high stakes tests are developed and tried out in pilot studies?

Parents might well suffer the ultimate consequences if an offspring fails a high stakes test. Unhappy children do not make for an emotional environment conducive to good living. Even more so, the child is the loser in failing the test! Poorly written test items, not properly tried out in pilot studies, makes it difficult to justify a high stakes test. Machine scoring also presents its problems. Minnesota, for example, had students failing an exit test, until a parent inquired about the test and found many scoring errors form machine scored tests. Many of the "failing" students were devastated over the test results and also after the corrections had been made. Then too, an academic area's test items may be written at too complex a level, such as in New Jersey in which there were suspiciously low fourth grade test scores, as compared to the other parts of the test (Education, September 6, 2000).

The many tests given each year can only be done with the use of machine scoring to appraise student results. Just think of doing the scoring by hand. Impossible!

In closing, the question arises as to hard do students try when they take the many required tests. In an article entitled, "Test Scores Decrease, Students show Apathy" (Index, October, 26, 2000), the following excerpts were taken from a university testing situation:

"Scores for the required junior test show a marked decrease from freshman test scores due to student apathy. The biggest performance decreases were in science reasoning and reading, both with more than 52% of test takers showing a negative change, according to 1999 assessment reports."

"I filled out random circles on the junior test, then sat there and did homework the rest of the time..."

"I barely tried to answer the questions...I thought it was stupid, pointless and a waste of time."

"The assessment reports stated that the Academic Profile test

results had decreased in all areas."

"I didn't really try on the test...I just used the three hours to catch up on studying."

"Nancy Asher, Coordinator of assessment and reporting, said she has taken student's home work away from them during the test and asked them to put effort into the test."

Motivation in test taking is truly a problem. No doubt when the stakes are high and crucial decisions are made on the test taker's entire future such as when a high school diploma is not issued, then extreme anxiety does set in. Failure is an awful thing to experience. When the stakes are low, then a higher energy level for test taking should be in evidence. There are problems which public schools and universities face in student test taking. Questions still arise as to how can students best show what they have achieved and learned. Much research and discussion will need to be put in to answer this question.

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